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Peter B. Neubauer

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# The Many Meanings of Play

## Introduction

PETER B. NEUBAUER, M.D.

THE ATTEMPT TO DEFINE PLAY LEADS EITHER TO A CONCEPT SO broad that the borders between other mental and physical acts disappear, or to one so narrow that its usefulness is limited. Thus it may be of help to postpone the answer to the question, "What is play?" and to explore instead the role of play as we see it when we observe and analyze children.

There are, as has been pointed out, two interlocking components, a mental act and a conscious or unconscious fantasy and wishes, and a physical act which carries these into an observable enactment. These two components alone would not allow us to differentiate play from work. In games and in work, an idea or an attempt to fulfill a wish is also carried into physical achievements. Play therefore must have an additional quality which we might refer to as "trying on," an exploration, an attempt to resolve a problem in order to achieve a new level of competence or developmental organization. At closer inspection, even this characteristic insufficiently differentiates it from work. The carpenter, the artist, or the inventor may be hard at work to "try on" new solutions and to experiment in action and thought. Thus it is essential to stress what seems to be self-evident—that the necessary additional characteristic of play is the *awareness* that what is enacted is *not real*. The act is accomplished on a level of symbolic meaning; however close at times it may be to reality, it is after all "play." We assume that the child knows that the teddy

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Clinical professor of psychiatry at the Psychoanalytic Institute, New York University; Chairman emeritus at the Columbia University Psychoanalytic Center for Training and Research.

bear is not real, that the tower he builds and then destroys is not a real tower, nor is the destruction a true destruction. The infant functioning on a presymbolic level does not play. One needs to explore here at what time in development the infant is able to enter the world of play. At what age can we expect the baby to be aware of the difference between wish and reality? It has been suggested by Eugene Mahon (verbal communication) that the child's early exercises, practicing the evolving ego apparatus, is closer to work than it is to play. The peek-a-boo "play" may thus be a forerunner of play which will later become hide-and-seek play, the experimentation with loss and reunion, loss and retrieval, with the accompanying anxiety and the capacity to learn to anticipate events.

Freud (1930) clarifies our issues further: "Another technique for fending off suffering is the employment of the displacements of libido which our mental apparatus permits of and through which its function gains so much in *flexibility*. The task here is that of shifting the instinctual aims in such a way that they cannot come up against frustration from the external world" (p. 79). Here Freud speaks about those mechanisms which lead to sublimation as a protective device. Play stays too close to the drives to qualify as sublimation, but there are aspects of play which lead in this direction.

Freud then pursues the striving to achieve some independence of the external world: "the connection with reality is still further loosened; satisfaction is obtained from illusions, which are recognized as such without the discrepancy between them and reality being allowed to interfere with enjoyment. The region from which these illusions arise is the life of the imagination; at the time when the development of the sense of reality took place, this region was expressly exempted from the demands of reality testing and was set apart for the purpose of fulfilling wishes which were difficult to carry out" (p. 80). Freud uses this line of thought to explore art; much of it is applicable to the role of play. Imagination is trying on in the mind, to anticipate new solutions, to elaborate possibilities in contact with fantasies. Play demands, in addition, enactment. It is this demand which gives play its special place in psychic life and its rich opportunity for psychoanalytic interventions, especially in children. When the child invites the analyst to join *his* or *her* play, we

participate only in the role assigned to us, precisely because it is understood to be a make-believe act. The analyst finds himself in a different position when the child asks him to play ball, or hide-and-seek, or a game, for the analyst then acts according to his intentions, unless the child assigns to him every step of interaction.

Freud (1930) adds another dimension: "The boundaries of this primitive pleasure-ego cannot escape rectification through experience. Some of the things that one is unwilling to give up, because they give pleasure, are nevertheless not ego but object. . . . One comes to learn a procedure by which, through a deliberate direction of one's sensory activities and through suitable muscular action, one can differentiate between what is internal—what belongs to the ego—and what is external—what emanates from the outer world. In this way one makes the first step towards the introduction of the reality principle which is to dominate future development" (p. 67).

This statement documents that play follows the pleasure principle, but nevertheless serves in an experimental way to pursue the road to reality. When the same play continues over a long period, because no appropriate solution is found, then we recognize that there is regression to or fixation on a point of pathological conflict or developmental deviations.

This process varies greatly in the economy of psychic life. At times, it is close to drive expressions. The ego, so to speak, has lost itself in the enacting of fantasy, while at other times the play attempts to reach more and more of reality and the concreteness of experience.

From a structural point of view, we also find great variations, dependent on, among other variables, the ego's capacity to regress, to tolerate drive expression and anxiety. From a topographic view, we see the capacity to tolerate preconscious states and to elaborate preconscious fantasies in conscious acts. Often, there is no sharp border between fantasy and thought as preparation for functioning in reality and those trial thoughts and actions which belong to the area of play.

From the viewpoint of drives, play can be studied as to the admixture of libidinal and aggressive strivings, with the discharge to be considered the aim but without a need to consider reality consequences, the reaction of the outside world, and

therefore without guilt from the side of the ego or superego. Thus we can study the changing role of play from all the metapsychological consideration in the course of analysis.

A 6-year-old boy played over many months with blocks representing either swords or cars which fought and crashed against each other. The fight was deadly. After this, the young patient asked the analyst to be a zoo keeper who captured dangerous wild animals. By treating them nicely, the analyst could tame them to be gentle; he then was asked to demonstrate the animals in their new behavior to the observing patient. I do not need to discuss the meaning of the change of this patient's play, nor do I need to outline the expected succeeding changes which will lead to the child's taking over the taming of the animals and to the child becoming the tamer of his own aggression. A point for further consideration is the degree of displacement; whether it shifts from the primary objects to other objects or to animals or to inanimate objects. Are the differences in the shifts significant on a symbolic level, and do they represent a noteworthy reflection of the defensive maneuvers which are seen in the need to establish distance from the primary objects?

One aspect of this child's play is noteworthy. When he was not playing during the sessions, he sought affectionate contacts with the analyst. He often regressed to prephallic libidinal experiences. During the play, as we have seen, he asserted himself, took control, and advanced in his psychosexual struggle. In the safe make-believe world of his imagination he could pursue his developmental progression—that which he did not dare to express in reality. This leads me to a question which I should try to answer: To what degree can one resolve conflicts by play without the correction of displacements and without bringing into awareness the primary relationships? I have often been surprised at the progress children in analysis can make without "primary interpretations." I mean by that term those interpretations that address themselves to the patient's relationship to primary objects.

Samuel Ritvo (1978) referred to this same technical consideration: "One of the major tenets of technique in child analysis is to offer interpretations in the idiom of the play and to choose carefully the time and setting when interpretations are offered directly because the child is so intolerant of them. The child is

prone to become anxious, uncomfortable, and uncomprehending in response to a direct interpretation, and to break off the communication by fantasy play" (p. 301). Even in the psychoanalytic situation play cannot be viewed as an aberration which leads the child away from reality; it is a normal activity which may be endowed with pathological features. The child's playing during the analysis, that is, in the presence of the analyst, can be seen as a mode of communication. The degree to which the analyst is experienced as part of the play varies greatly. There are children who, at certain phases in the analysis, seem to exclude the analyst; for others, the analyst is a prime collaborator. This by itself is indicative of the child's object relationships, his transference, for even the exclusion of the analyst is a significant statement about the child's object relationships. Often, the psychoanalyst is made to be an ally of the child's wishes and fantasies—a part of the displacements or detours which are necessary so as not to face reality, and to find solution under the control of the child's ego; at the same time, the analyst is seen as an object who does not deny drive expressions.

When we follow the developmental line from play to game to work, we follow the ascendance of the reality principle. As Anna Freud (1965) pointed out, each developmental line intersects with others to bring about new developmental organization and reorganization. We can often observe the overlapping of phases or the coexistence of conflicts from one phase with those of another. Therefore, a child may "play a game," that is to say, the rules are changed according to the needs and wishes of the child. The analyst and the patient may share the recognition that they continue to "pretend," that they are engaged in a game while it has become a play. Similarly, a play can have significant features of a game. Rules are introduced—those that reflect ego controls and those which stem from the demands of the superego. There are toys, such as lego, which lead the child to consider reality and guide him toward work. As I mentioned before, this developmental line should lead from the preplay phase to play, to game, to work.

When I spoke about play being either close to drive expressions or to reality, I was simplifying the clinical function of play; I treated it as if it were a unit reflecting *one* dynamic, structural, and economic condition, when in fact play may combine many

aspects side by side or move from one to another. In the continuous search for solutions, there may be more fantasy at one time and later more reality.

There are similarities and dissimilarities between dream and play analysis. We listen until the dream is completely told, for the outcome of the dreamwork reveals the capacity to resolve problems and the degree of anxiety connected with the inability to achieve it. Similarly, it may be advisable to wait until we know the outcome of the play, its gestalt, before we can usefully interpret the manifest and latent meaning. This does not exclude questions about the play's details. An early intervention during the play may not only evoke annoyance or disapproval of the psychoanalytic process, but may also deprive the analyst of the understanding of the complete function of play. Like the interruption of daydreams, it is experienced as an interference, an interruption which may lead to discontent.

Play has three characteristics: it is an expression of wishes and fantasies; it is an enactment of these wishes in search of fulfillment; and it is an awareness of its nonreality. These characteristics play a role on the road to reality, though it is difficult at times to maintain the distinction between reality and nonreality. There are also many variations in the degree of translating fantasies into enactments. Playing with words, the substitutions of acts by words—an aim of the psychoanalytic process—can often blur the distinction between words and acts. The verbal assignment of a fantasy role to the analyst may at times be enough, and therefore the boundaries between play and fantasy, play and words, play and drawings are not always distinct.

The intensity with which children and adults play, that is, the earnestness of intention of the psychic investment, reflects a sharp difference between play and playfulness. It seems that this characteristic of play—the nonreality of it, the symbolic displacement—allows it to occur. The lowering of the demands of the superego and the ego's acceptance of preconscious and unconscious drive derivatives, their libidinal and aggressive discharges in action, give play a dramatic fervor that could not be tolerated when it was directly expressed within the context of primary relationships or when reenacted as the *original* events.

In addition to the trying on of new solutions, and the change

from a position of passivity to activity, those drive discharges have their therapeutic value. Since pathological conflicts may be interwoven with normal capacities or may coexist with them, it appears to be important, as in all conflict, to speak of both components. Which aspect of play should come under psychoanalytic scrutiny should guide the analytic work at any given time, though it also depends on the analyst's insight. We know that play cannot be viewed as totally pathological; rather, certain components may serve pathological or healthy strivings.

This short outline confirms the notion that play has a special, unique place in psychic life, particularly in the world of the child. I have referred to some of the technical implications and have raised many questions. In addition, one wishes to follow the various transformations of childhood play in adult life. One has to question the notion that the steps in the developmental line from play to work follow discontinuities as seen in the sequence of the libidinal phases. Rather we see the transformations into complex mental acts which either still reflect the earlier demands of plays or are offshoots from it with many branches which link wishes, imagination, and fantasies into sublimated functions. Calvino (1986) gives an example of it: "it has generally been said that the fable is a profane story, something that comes after myth. . . . My argument leads to the conclusion that the making of fables precedes making of myths. . . . Myths tend to crystallize instantly, to fall into set patterns, to pass from the phase of myth-making into that of ritual. . . . The game can work as a challenge to understand the world or as a dissuasion from understanding it . . . the boundary is not always clearly marked, and I would say on this score that the spirit in which one reads is decisive."

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